

The Rosenbergs: New Evidence, Old Passions

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By SAM ROBERTS

A new book's conclusions that Julius Rosenberg was indeed a Soviet spy whose execution served the purposes of the American Government and the Communist Party has revived an emotional debate about his guilt and the role of his wife, Ethel.

The conclusions of the book, "The Rosenberg File," are by no means new. But in a controversy that has thrived for more than three decades, the book's credibility has been enhanced on two counts.

Its authors said they began their research believing Mr. Rosenberg and his wife were innocent, and the authors combine personal interviews with corroborating evidence from Government files, much of which had previously been released but never assembled.

But not everyone is convinced. Those who insist the Rosenbergs were not guilty — not guilty, at least, of the formal espionage conspiracy charges and of stealing a key secret to the atomic bomb — still question the credibility of the witnesses for the prosecution.

They are also seeking to undermine the book's conclusions by exposing its flaws, a few of which the authors acknowledge but say are not fatal to their research.

What the authors, Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, say they found and what has emerged since their book was released this summer are the following:

Two engineers, who Federal agents suspected were members of an espionage ring led by Mr. Rosenberg, eventually found refuge in the Soviet Union, according to an interview this month with a Russian émigré. The two disappeared around the time that the Rosenbergs were arrested, in 1950.

The case against Mrs. Rosenberg was described by the chief prosecutor as "not too strong." On the day Mr. Rosenberg was arrested, Federal agents were urged to "consider every possible means to make him talk, including" "a careful study of the involvement of Ethel Rosenberg in order that charges be placed against her, if possible," according to a Federal Bureau of Investigation official quoted in the book.

A general counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union was said to have offered several times to join the defense team as an infiltrator for the F.B.I., according to bureau documents cited in the book. Lawyers connected with the case and the A.C.L.U. have said they could not corroborate the F.B.I. account.

The debate over the case began in an era when many Americans were convinced the Russians could never have invented an atomic bomb on their own. The discussions raised the question of whether the defendants were fairly tried, convicted and sentenced on the basis of the testimony and evidence.

With the benefit of hindsight, the debate has been broadened to include questions about the

Debate Over Spy Trial Revived by Interviews and Release of Files

fairness of the judge and prosecution and the adequacy of the evidence and even of the defense.

As a result of suits filed by the Rosenbergs' sons, the F.B.I. has released 161,000 pages from its files since the 70's, documents that defenders of the Rosenbergs had hoped would prove conclusively that they were framed. Some additional documents have been destroyed, and the F.B.I. says at least another 30,000 pages remain classified to protect privacy or national security.

What has emerged is a maze of circumstantial evidence, some of which, when placed in context by the authors, corroborates the accounts of prosecution eyewitnesses. It was just such a link that led Mr. Radosh to revise his verdict about Julius Rosenberg.

Coincided With Informant

Mr. Radosh was struck by the fact that during an interview, the recollections of James Weinstein, a friend of several targets of the original investigation, coincided with information from F.B.I. files and with details, apparently passed on to Federal agents from Jerome Eugene Tartakow, a jailhouse informer who had befriended Mr. Rosenberg.

"I've always thought they were engaged in some sort of, to put it politely, information-gathering or espionage," Mr. Weinstein said last month. "The book states it so definitively, you couldn't conclude otherwise if you have an open mind."

What, exactly, did Mr. Weinstein corroborate, according to "The Rosenberg File"? He recalled that a fellow student at Cornell University had quit the Communist Party to do "secret work," that the friend borrowed Mr. Weinstein's car many times and that had once asked Mr. Weinstein to chauffeur someone named "Julius" from Ithaca, N.Y., to New York City.

After learning that Julius had subsequently paid a surprise visit to the apartment shared by Mr. Weinstein and his friend from Cornell, the friend was said to have exclaimed nervously to Mr. Weinstein, "He knows he's not supposed to come here."

"My experience was even more circumstantial or tangential," Mr. Weinstein said last month, than the disappearance of the two engineers, "the thing that was most convincing to me."

Buried in such seemingly esoteric evidence is the crux of the controversy. The case has periodically inspired literary and dramatic spinoffs — the movie "Daniel" is the latest — and de-

bates among the curious and the participants, some of whom still suffer from wounds that even time has been unable to heal.

What Happened To the 2 Engineers?

One of the intriguing unanswered issues is why the two engineers vanished and where did they go? At least half the mystery may have been solved after the book was written.

In June 1950, Joel Barr disappeared from his rented apartment in a Paris suburb. The next month, Alfred Sarant, his best friend a colleague at a Signal Corps laboratory and, according to a source quoted in the book, a fellow member of the same Communist Party cell as Mr. Rosenberg during World War II, left Ithaca for New York City. In New York, Mr. Sarant rendezvoused with Carol Dayton, the wife of his next-door neighbor. Leaving young children behind, they drove across the country and were last seen entering Mexico, to Federal agents.

"Whether they simply made new lives in Mexico or elsewhere, or were victims of accident or foul play, would be interesting to know," Walter and Miriam Schneir wrote in the latest edition of their book, "Invitation to an Inquest," which says the Rosenbergs had been the victims of "frameup."

Now that he believes he does know, Mr. Radosh said:

"It confirms to us that the prosecution was right, that there was a pattern of flight. This is a case of people involved in technical, military work who ended up giving the ability they learned here to the Russians, which in my mind, in the broad sense, is espionage."

Emigré's Curiosity Piqued

Publicity about the books aroused the curiosity of Eric Firdman, a Soviet dissident who emigrated to the United States in 1981. He now believes that the engineer with whom he worked for two decades in the Soviet Union, the mustachioed man who called himself Filipp Georgievich Staros, was, in fact, Mr. Sarant, and that Iosif Veniaminovich Berg, who is said to be still living in Leningrad, was Joel Barr.

According to Mr. Firdman in an interview last month, Mr. Sarant headed a prominent microelectronics laboratory, later devoted his research to artificial intelligence and died in Moscow.

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